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ABSTRACT

Findings from a new nationally representative survey of 25,000 American eighth graders, their parents, teachers, and principals are reported. The study was produced by the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement and is called the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, or NELS:88. NELS:88 will follow the children every 2 years as they move into high school, college, or the labor market. The study's first survey year findings, which concern parents and children, parents and schools, and parent participation, reveal startling communication gaps among American adolescents, their parents, and their schools. Not only do students communicate infrequently with their parents about school, they also rarely get advice from counselors or teachers. It is concluded that attainment of national, state, and community educational goals is impossible without a significant increase in parental involvement in education. (RH)

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Issues In Education

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Parental Involvement In Education

For years education research has demonstrated that parental involvement is one of the real keys to success in school.

Indeed, when the President and the governors adopted the six national education goals, they knew that to achieve these goals parents would have to be essential partners.

Schools alone cannot educate children, particularly if parents display a lack of interest in what their children do in school. If we want children to have high expectations about learning, then all of us—especially parents—must regularly send those signals.

But these messages are not being sent and when they are, they often are not being received. One way for parents to send that message is to be actively involved in their children's schooling. However, the level of parental involvement, both with their schoo.children and their children's schools, is frighteningly low.

This is confirmed by data from a new nationally representative survey of 25,000 American eighth-graders, their parents, their teachers, and their principals. The study was produced by the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. It is called the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988—NELS:88 for short—and it will follow these same 25,000 youngsters every 2 years as they move into high school and college or the labor market.

The first survey was conducted in the spring of their eighth-grade year.

Parents & Children

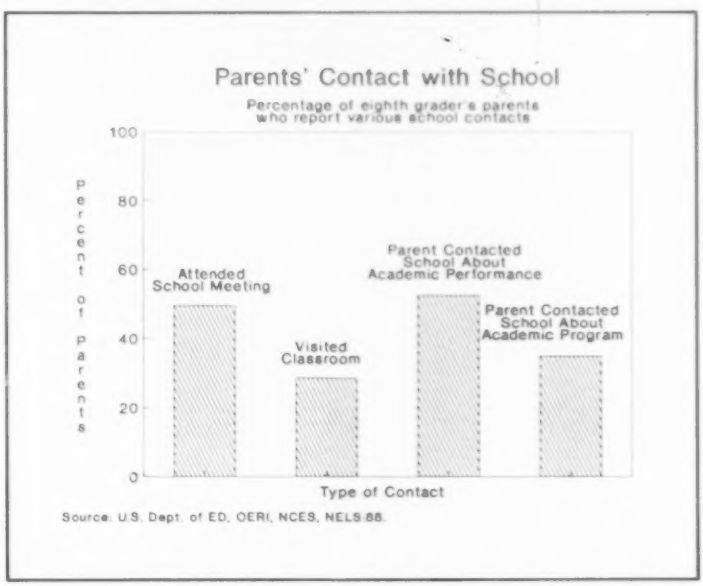
We know that parental interest in school work and frequent communication of the value of school are important. But the NELS:88 data show:

- Although three-quarters (79 percent) of parents said they talked *regularly* about their eighth-grader's school experiences, half of the students (48 percent) said they had such discussions less than twice since the school year began. And one child in nine said he or she never had such a conversation.

- Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of students said they never or rarely discussed their classes or school programs with their parents.

- One-quarter (26 percent) of students said their parents rarely or never checked their homework, while 57 percent of parents said they rarely (once or twice a month) or never helped their child with homework.

- Although a majority of parents (62 percent) said they enforced rules about how many hours their children could watch television on weekdays, the same percentage of children said their parents rarely or never limited their TV watching.



Parents & Schools

Research shows that effective schools are ones that involve parents in their children's learning and school life. But the NELS:88 data show:

- Only half (50 percent) of the parents had attended a school meeting since the beginning of the school year, and fewer than 3 in 10 (29 percent) had visited their children's classes.

- Nearly half (48 percent) of the parents

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said they had not contacted the school about their child's academic performance.

- Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of parents said they *never* had talked to school officials about the academic program being pursued by their eighth-grade child.

- About one-third (32 percent) of eighth-grade parents belong to a parent-teacher organization. Membership rates are lowest for Hispanics (16 percent) and American Indians (17 percent), two groups that are lagging badly in achievement and that are dropping out at far higher rates than other ethnic groups.

Involving Parents

The NELS:88 findings reveal startling communication gaps among American adolescents, their parents and their schools. Not only are students communicating infrequently with their parents about school, but the data also show they rarely get advice from counselors or teachers.

As James Coleman, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, has said, "They have no one to talk to . . . . Our society's children have become public goods. They are no one's private property, and no one is motivated to take responsibility for them."

"As a nation and as individuals we must take that responsibility," said Christopher T. Cross, Assistant Secretary of Education for Research and Improvement. "We can no longer afford to have parents disengaged from the education of their children. We cannot expect others to perform those duties, and we cannot expect children to do well without the guidance, the tutoring, the nurturing, and the commitment of parents. To do less is to consign our nation to an ever-accelerating decline into economic and educational oblivion."

Achievement of not only our national goals but also state and community education goals will not happen without significantly more parental involvement. The NELS:88 data show clearly what is not happening among adolescents, their parents, and their communities.

Other educational research has shown the importance of parents' involvement for the educational success of their children. To make that happen:

- Parents need to be made aware of just how important it is for them to talk to their children about school work and to become more involved with their children's school life.

- Schools and communities need to work to create more involvement by parents and, in some cases, create programs to help parents navigate their children through school.

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